

## Putting Down the Burdens of the Past

Yes, there really are a lot of obstacles to living a life guided by God's will and empowered by God's grace (i.e. God's gift of Godself to us). Temptations are, as a group, a major obstacle to what God is trying to do for us and through us. As someone said years ago, "I can resist anything except temptation." Of course, temptations vary with age, ability, experience and other factors. I live with the task of resisting the temptation posed by dark chocolate!

At least some of our temptations are actually good for us in modest amounts. I like to cite my late friend Tony O. as a witness in my defense. Tony told me that he had a square of dark chocolate (1" by 1") every day. Tony died recently at the age of 98—not from the dark chocolate.

There are, however, things that we either swallow or otherwise allow into our inner selves that are far darker and much more dangerous than the darkest chocolate. They are the forces from many sources, material or spiritual, that pretend either to be good for us or at least "not as bad" as what our neighbors are doing.

I am old enough to reminisce about the ways that I used to cope with temptations. One problem with that kind of reminiscing, however, is that I tend to focus on myself rather than on God and God's people. The early part of my spiritual life

involved a lot of guilt over my sins. So, I used a prayer of confession. The part that I remember is this: "Lord, I am sorry, and I repent for the things that I did that I should not have done and for the things that I did not do that I should have done. Please forgive me." When I said this prayer during worship the pastor would assure us that God's mercy was greater than any of our sins and that God forgives all who are sorry and repent of their sins.

I may not have fully accepted that God's love was that powerful. Yet, I was assured by several pastors that it is. Of course, until I accepted God's power to forgive me, I was stuck. I could not hope to heal spiritually, much less to grow spiritually, until I let God into my heart. I don't believe that God meant for us to be stuck with a burden of fear of not being acceptable to God. Sadly, many of us have carried that burden for a lifetime.

Many of us, including me, carry other burdens from our past that get in the way of our spiritual growth today. Memories of abuse, rejection, war, being, being humiliated or being poor may still color how we experience life in general and people in particular. Other memories may have been implanted into us in the form of stories repeated to each new generation for centuries. These stories can affect us directly. They may be cark stories about certain groups or families. They may also be specifically about an alcoholic relative, a cousin who committed suicide, a



grandfather who sexually abused children, etc. These stories of dehumanizing experiences are difficult to forget. If we don't put them down, however, they drain our enthusiasm for God and the work of God's Church.

There is no "geographical cure" as one of my counseling professors told us. The memories are always with us wherever we go. I found that it took time, effort and God's grace to heal from my own burdens. I had to focus on trusting God with my whole life and not just my sins or other forms of brokenness. I had prayed, read and studied the Bible, confessed my sins, gone on retreat and read widely on the lives of people who the church considers to be examples of how to live as a disciple of Jesus. Belonging to a Christian community was and still is a vital part of being one of Jesus' disciples. Worship in a church was and is very important to me, and I miss only when I am ill.

Holy Communion is the most sacred healing experience for me. In coming to the front of the church to receive communion I experience three aspects of community at one time: 1) the presence of the congregation as community around me, 2) the experience of being part of that community, and 3) Jesus Christ within me healing and strengthening me once again.

I needed, and I believe that God wanted me, to get some counseling, to let go of some really painful memories of what I had done and what I had failed to do. I also had memories of what had been done to me or that I had seen happen to others. It is not easy to share some of our memories and other burdens even with a really trustworthy spiritual director or pastoral therapist. To acknowledge any of these memories is even harder in a group.

One of the key reasons why it is so difficult is that we don't want to be known for what we have done that is not good or as someone who did not do the good that we were called to do. However, another part of the problem is that we think of our suffering as well as the suffering of others, and we don't see ways to put down the burden without being vulnerable in some way. Perhaps the vulnerability is in our perceptions of the situation, and we have no one to help us to take the risk of getting help. That's where the Church as a community can make a difference. We can pray for and with people. We can help to sustain them with emotional support, especially our love, when they grieve or re-experience their losses. We can even provide financial support if they can't afford pastoral psychotherapy or spiritual direction. At the very least we can recommend that they speak with a discerning pastor. It can be an initial step in putting down our burdens.

Our souls, our spiritual or inner selves, are sometimes burdened to the point of exhaustion. If that feels like where one or more of us are right now, I urge you to ask for help. At least allow the congregation and the prayer team to pray for you. Come to worship and Bible study and partake of Holy Communion. Every church has something to offer. Some have more of what we need at a given moment, but we who are in the many tens of thousands of congregations are willing to share with you what our strengths and areas of growth are. We ask that you take the chance of finding God in our midst. Who knows? In laying down your burden you will experience God's love in a new and exciting way. You may have spiritual gifts that will bless those of us who are already in whichever congregation you feel drawn to visit and even to join.

As always, I welcome your [responses](#).

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